

“Porcupines”
Micah 6:6-8, Acts 11:19-30
February 2, 2020

For so many of us, Jesus was at His best as a teacher when He drew parallels between the heavenly and everyday worlds. Who could ever forget His illustration that God’s forgiveness is like a father welcoming home his prodigal son? And then there are the simple stories of the Kingdom being compared to a pearl of great price, or a grain of mustard seed, or a great wedding feast.

These all stand out, even among non-church-goers, because none of these parallels is too foreign to our minds. They have become a part and parcel of our entire culture, and how we express ourselves.

But there’s a more modern illustration that might not have the staying power of what Jesus said so many years ago, but the imagery of it has struck me, and will always stay with me: The church is often like porcupines in a snowstorm. We need each other to keep warm, but we risk prickling each other when we get a little too close to each other - too close for comfort.

This, of course, is a short-hand way of saying what a Christian psychiatrist diagnosed as a major problem in the modern age: Dr. M. Scott Peck in his book “The Different Drum” wrote that the sense of community in both church and society is currently rare, arguing that “In and through community lies the salvation of the world ... [But] most of us have never had an experience of true community ... Still, the attempt must be made. For the human race today stands at the brink of self-annihilation.”

This won’t be easy, Dr. Peck warns. “Community neither comes naturally nor it is purchased cheaply ... [for] the spirit of community is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.”

Indeed, community cannot come easily to a group of porcupines seeking to huddle together to keep warm in a snowstorm, because community comes from a spirit of love, not from desperate acts of self-preservation. And, as Jesus reminds us in Matthew’s

gospel, those who seek to preserve their life ... will lose it. And the real love, the sacrificial love which is needed to find life, does not come cheaply, as Calvary taught us.

And so we must ask ourselves, if love is not cheap, then what is dear to us? Put another way, we might wonder, "What is worth dying for?" We can possibly answer that question another way by asking ourselves: "What do we get upset about?" Chances are that if we are not fully committed to something, then we won't really care about it one way or the other. It won't strike us as important enough to get worked up about, to become passionate about, to lay down our lives for it.

In an otherwise obscure passage from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles which we heard a few minutes ago, the newly-named Christians were upset about something. There was a world-wide famine - and I dare say that most people would be concerned about not having enough to eat. But the community of Christians in Antioch, in what is now Syria, were not primarily concerned about themselves going hungry; their first thought wasn't about their own self-preservation. Instead, they were first thinking about the mother church in Jerusalem, for the mother church was on the brink of starvation. And so, although food was scarce in Antioch just like everywhere else, the Christian community at Antioch gave food so that those imperiled in Jerusalem might be saved.

Such sacrifice reminds me of a family that kept a poor box in their home during the Great Depression. This family was no better off than anyone else, but they still made a point of putting something in the box just about everyday, even if it was just a few pennies or a nickel. And you know, the children in that family never even realized that they were poor, because in their poverty, they would still share something with others.

Another church family that I know personally in the 1950's used to buy Oxydol detergent in the days when Oxydol - which no longer exists - gave away a free towel in each family size box. I wonder how many of us remember that! Those towels, without fail, were sent to the mission field by this particular family, even though they were using torn up sheets and old worn out shirts to dry their own dinner dishes.

These two families were upset about hunger, about want, about need. They were upset enough that they reached out to their neighbors to lend a helping hand, even when an outside observer might have concluded that they really had no business being generous in the first place. But these supposedly poor people were concerned enough to share. In other words, they were concerned about community. They knew that we were all in this together.

The world needs more people to be upset about the lack of community in our world. There are precious few who are upset enough to help in mission projects or to invite a neighbor to church in order to help create a sense of community, of mutual help, of love. We must remember that that is what we are supposed to be all about, because scripture describes us as the people of God, and God is defined in the New Testament as nothing other than love itself. Surely we should be getting upset when love is not shown, when love does not rush to the rescue, when love - because of its lack - fails to heal.

But so many people in our society have decided that IF they're going to be disturbed about something, it will be about looking out for Number One, or about tempests in teapots, or conclusions jumped to erroneously, or about rumors or gossip or fake news or whatever. But heaven knows there are enough real live issues to get upset about than to make up some extra ones.

If we are going to get upset, let's do it over important things, over matters that the church was originally called into existence to deal with. And so once again, for a third time in fact since the beginning of this year, let us hear yet again what Jesus found to be important enough to engage His full attention. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus was all about bringing the world good news, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, and comfort for those who mourn.

For in the final analysis, what does the Lord require of us - but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?

Let us pray: